

SPIRITUAL SPRING TRAINING PRAYER FEB 28 2010  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
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Today is the second Sunday in our Lenten sermon series entitled: SPIRITUAL SPRING TRAINING with the focus on the discipline of prayer.

It is clear that Jesus spent a lot of time in prayer to God. I went through the Gospels and found many places where we are told that Jesus spent time alone in prayer. I choose five of these texts to illustrate how often Jesus went apart by himself to pray or told his disciples to go apart to pray.

Today we are blessed to have a young person read the Scripture for us.

8:15 am: BAILEY MIDDAUGH, daughter of PHIL AND BARB MIDDAUGH (What grade and school?)  
What do your parents do?

9:30 AM: LAUREN ROOP, daughter of MATT AND KIMBERLY ROOP

11:00 AM: ELIZABETH NICULESCU, daughter of ALEXANDER AND HELEN NICULESCU

Let us pray a prayer often prayed by John Wesley.

Ed Robertson, a long time member of our congregation, passed away a couple of weeks ago. Ed and his wife Cynthia have two daughters. When I met with Cynthia and their daughters to plan the memorial service, I asked them to describe their dad and both daughters said he was kind, patient, generous, faithful and a good listener.

One daughter said that all her life she was able to talk to her dad about everything that was going on in her life. She never held anything back and could tell him the good things as well as the bad things. She said that she talked on the phone to her dad about once every day and what she would miss most was those daily conversations.

At his memorial service we thanked God for giving Ed to us as a kind, patient, generous and faithful person who was a good listener and whose daughters loved to talk with him about everything going on in their lives.

I thought, "What a great relationship for a daughter to have with her dad. She could talk with him about anything on her mind and she knew he would listen and understand. And she would talk daily with him.

Prayer is talking to God on a daily basis about anything on your mind just the way those daughters could talk to their dad on a daily basis about everything on their minds.

Those daughters' relationship with their dad is a lot like the relationship that God wants with all of us.

God, like a loving parent, wants all of us to be able to share with him about everything going on in our lives, the good and the bad, the pleasant and the unpleasant. God doesn't want us to come to him in prayer just when we have a crisis or some great need. Like a loving parent, God wants a life-long loving and sharing relationship with all of his children.

I wish that we all had the deep sharing relationship with God, that Ed Robertson's daughters describe having with their dad.

Prayer is simply having that kind of relationship with God - a relationship where we can share everything that is going on in our lives; the good and the bad; the beautiful and the ugly.

Unfortunately, we often think that prayer is saying the right things to God with certain words and in a certain tone of voice or just coming to God in a time of crisis.

Some people say I don't know how to pray. I say, "If you have ever expressed your honest and deepest feelings to someone else, then you know how to pray."

Prayer is simply expressing our honest and deepest feelings with the Creator of the universe who cares about us and eagerly longs for us to share our feelings with him.

I have noticed that when children are little, they share their feelings quickly and easily with their mom and dad. When they are happy they will hug your neck and say I love you and when they are unhappy they will blurt out I hate you. You see, children are totally honest in sharing their feelings of joy or sorrow with their parents because they know they can trust their parents to love them unconditionally.

Perhaps that is why Jesus said that unless we become like little children we will never experience the living presence of God in our lives. Perhaps we don't experience the living presence of God in our lives because we don't share our lives completely and honestly with God the way little children share their honest feelings with their parents.

Jesus shows us how to share our lives completely with God.

Throughout the Gospels we are told that Jesus would get up very early in the morning, leave the house he was staying in and go out to deserted places and spend hours in prayer to God.

What do you think Jesus prayed about in those hours spent with God? Jesus called God "Abba" which is an Aramaic word meaning "dad" or "daddy." It is the word that a small child would use for their father.

The simple use of that intimate word "Abba" for God indicates the nature of Jesus' relationship with God. He saw God as his Abba or his dad or Daddy.

I suspect that when Jesus talked with God he talked about everything. He talked to him about his joys in seeing people healed and made whole; his joy in seeing hundreds of people come to hear his message about God's amazing grace, and his joy in sharing his journey with a band of followers who had left everything and followed him.

But I also suspect that Jesus talked to God about his frustrations as well. I suspect that Jesus shared with God his disappointment that the priests and the Pharisees and other religious leaders were so suspicious of him and sought to discredit him and undermine his work with the people. I suspect Jesus shared with his Abba his frustration with the disciples and how often they misunderstood what he was trying to do.

I suspect that Jesus shared with God his frustration that people only came to him to be healed or fed but did not surrender themselves to God or trust in God or forgive their enemies and live lives of compassion and kindness towards others.

I suspect that Jesus shared both his joys and his frustrations with God just as a little child openly shares their joys and frustrations with parents who they know love them.

I think that is what Jesus is talking about when he tells us that we should “pray always and not lose heart.” This means that we should talk to God always, when our heart is full of joy and thanksgivings and when we are losing heart and becoming discouraged with life. Pray always and in all circumstances.

The only real instruction Jesus gives on prayer is to “go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Abba in secret.”

This means that we need to find quiet and personal times in our lives where we can be alone with Abba where we can share honestly the joys and sorrows of our lives with one who is always more ready to listen than we are to speak and more ready to forgive than we are to confess.

When our children were little, they would come to Minnietta and me and tell us everything that came into their minds. They held nothing back.

However, as they grew into their teenage years and were sure that their parents didn't know anything, they told us less and less and only what they wanted us to know. I remember when our kids were teenagers they didn't even want to be seen in public with us. Our daughter would duck down in the car if we drove past some of her friends and our son would walk about ten steps behind us so no one would think that he was going somewhere with his parents.

I understand that teenagers need to have some kind of separation from their parents during those years so they can discover their own individual identity but I missed walking close to them during those years and having the totally open and honest sharing we had when they were young.

Then as they became young adults, they would walk down the street with us again and we renewed the open and honest sharing we had had before.

I suspect that God feels the same way. God loves it when we are totally open and honest with God rather than distancing ourselves from him and only sharing with him what we think he would want to hear or when we are in a crisis.

Last week, I encouraged us during Lent to ask God for help every morning when we wake up. I have been consciously doing that every day this past week and it has been wonderful. I think about the people I will meet with during the day and the tasks I need to accomplish and then I just ask God to help me be a kind and loving person in the midst of those tasks and to reflect God's love in every situation.

I honestly share my frustrations with some situations and my frustrations always diminish when I can share them honestly with God.

Last week, I also asked us to end each day by thanking God for being with us during all the experiences of that day. I find it enriching to simply go over the events of the past day in my mind and relive the highlights and thank God for the journey.

Honestly ask for God's help in the morning and honestly give God thanks in the evening. It is a lot like a little child sharing with a loving parent.

Jesus took time to talk with God and he encouraged his followers to take time to talk with God. His disciples realized that prayer was the source of Jesus' power to speak with a heavenly wisdom and to heal with heavenly power.

They wanted that same connection with God so in Luke's Gospel we are told that the disciples once asked Jesus to teach them to pray.

It is interesting that they never asked Jesus to teach them to preach, to teach, to heal or lead which are the others things they saw Jesus doing. But they asked him to teach them to pray because they knew it was the source of Jesus' faith, peace and power. They always saw him going off to pray by himself, and they figured that that was where his power came from.

I know that Jesus was pleased they made that request. When we ask Jesus to teach us to pray, it means we are finally open to learning and growing in our relationship with God.

Jesus didn't give them any instructions in how to pray; he simply gave them a sample prayer to pray. We learn to pray by praying just like we learn to swim by swimming or to ski by skiing. In other words, just jump in and do it.

Then Jesus gave them a sample prayer which demonstrates both intimacy with God and our need for God.

Here is my contemporary paraphrase of what we commonly call The Lord's Prayer. I would encourage all of us to write a paraphrase of The Lord's prayer as a way of putting it in our own words to express what it means to us today.

LOVER OF ALL OF US, THANK YOU FOR YOUR LIVING PRESENCE AROUND US RIGHT NOW,  
WE SURRENDER OURSELVES INTO YOUR LOVING HANDS SO YOUR WILL CAN BE DONE IN AND THROUGH  
US,  
THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING WE NEED TO LIVE IN YOUR WORLD.  
THANK YOU FOR FORGIVING US WHEN WE MESS UP AND HELP US TO FORGIVE OTHERS WHEN THEY  
MESS UP.  
HELP US TO OVERCOME OUR TEMPTATIONS TO BE NEGATIVE AND CYNICAL.  
WE LOVE YOU, WE FOLLOW YOU, AND WE ARE ETERNALLY GRATEFUL TO YOU.  
SO BE IT.

Sometimes I find it helpful to write out paraphrases of Scripture, to put it in my own words so it becomes an honest expression of my heart to God. However, when I pray The Lord's Prayer in worship I always use the traditional words recorded in Scripture.

The first point is that when we pray we should be as honest and open with God as a little child is open and honest with their parents and then we would experience a meaningful relationship with our loving creator.

The second point is that we should not only pray for ourselves but we should pray for others.

RICHARD FOSTER is one of the great spiritual writers of our time. He is a Quaker and has written books entitled *CELEBRATION OF DISCIPLINE* and *PRAYER: FINDING THE HEARTS TRUE HOME*.

Foster says that when we are beginning to pray, the easiest way is to pray for other people. When you hear that a good friend or relative is critically ill, your heart automatically goes out to them. You begin to think about all the implications and complications that illness will cause in their lives. You imagine the pain they might be going through. You have empathy for them and their situation; you feel their pain.

So the natural next step is to surrender them into the loving, healing hands of God-to pray for them.

Foster says that prayer for others starts with compassion. You have compassion for someone and the best thing you can do to help them is to pray for them.

When we start to pray for someone in suffering, Foster says that we should imagine them well. Imagine the person you are praying for as whole and well and smiling. Hold that image in your mind every time you think about them and ask God to make that image a reality.

When you think of a marriage in conflict, or alienation between parents and their children, or a strained relationship at work, just imagine those persons reunited and at peace because their relationship has been healed. When we can imagine it in our minds and souls it is much easier for God can make it a reality. God uses us to be channels of God's healing power.

Richard Foster tells a story about coming to a home where there was a seriously ill baby girl. Her parents brought him into the little girl's room. She had a four-year-old brother and Richard Foster told the little boy that he needed his help to pray for his baby sister.

Foster said that he and the little boy sat down in chairs beside the baby's crib. He said to the little boy, "We know that Jesus is always with us so imagine that Jesus is right here behind us. Can you imagine that?" The four year old said, "Yes." So they sat there in silence just imagining that Jesus was right behind them.

Foster said: "Can you imagine that Julie is well? Can you see her smiling and happy again? The little boy said, "Yes."

Then Foster told the little boy to join him in putting their hands on Julie and imagining that light from Jesus was flowing through their hands into the body of Julie and making her well, smiling and happy again.

They laid their hands on Julie, imagined the light of Jesus coming through their hands and imagined Julie, happy and well again. After awhile, Foster offered a prayer thanking God for the healing of Julie.

Foster said the next morning, Julie's parents called and told him that Julie was perfectly well again. Now, I need to tell you that Julie also received good medical care and was on medication to help her heal as well. But that little boy grew up knowing the power of prayer from his own experience.

The only way that any of us become committed to the discipline of prayer is through our own experience of the difference that prayer makes in our lives and the lives of people we know and love.

Last week, I had an opportunity to talk to a teacher here in Washington Township. She is obviously a very dedicated and committed teacher. I asked her to tell me about her class and she explained that she worked with students who had failed in certain subjects and her job was to help them pass the necessary tests to go on to the next grade.

I said that must be a challenging job and she almost broke into tears. She said it is so hard and frustrating. So many of the students have already given up and don't even want to try. She tries everything she can to help them learn, but many of them are so far behind that it is very difficult to help them catch up.

It was clear to me that she was a dedicated and committed teacher who was doing everything in her power and using all of her educational skills to help her students learn but it was not enough for some of them.

This was not a person from our church or even a person I knew very well, but something came to me and I blurted it out.

I said that I would like to make a suggestion of something she might try. She said she was open to anything that might help.

I said: "For the next six weeks, I encourage you to imagine each one of your students getting the subject; imagine the light going on for them and that they finally understand what you are trying to teach them. This is called prayer. Would you pray for each of your students for the next six weeks and then tell me if it made any difference in their learning?"

She looked intently at me and said: "How did you know that I only have six weeks more with these students before they retake their tests?" Then, she went on to say that she would try it and send me a report in six weeks.

I thought that might be a good experiment for all of us. Think about some person you know who is sick, facing challenges at school or work, or in conflict of some kind.

Now imagine them well, or successful at school or work or reconciled. Can you imagine them in that new state of being? Then imagine that Christ is right behind you and using your imagination, your love, your prayers, and your energy to bring your imagined state to reality.

Practice that for the six weeks of Lent and then on Easter, see if there is any difference in the situation in their lives.

When we visit Jerusalem this spring, we will visit the Western Wall of the Jewish Temple. The Jerusalem temple which was built by King Herod and in which Jesus and his disciples prayed, was destroyed by Roman troops in 70 AD. All that was left standing was the western wall of the Temple.

That wall has been excavated and is now known as the Wailing Wall because it is the place where millions of people visit every year and pray and some of them bring their concerns to God with loud weeping and wailing. It has become a tradition that when you pray at the Wailing Wall, you write your prayer on a slip of paper, fold it up and put it in one of the cracks between the stones in this ancient wall.

I have stood before that wall several times, thought about someone in need, imagined them healed and blessed, wrote a prayer of thanksgiving to God for that healing and then folded it up and placed it in the wall. I don't know if what I imagined always became true but I know that I was always changed in the process of praying for someone else and surrendering them into the hands of God.

This morning we have an artificial wailing wall constructed at the east end of the narthex. It is just big boxes stacked on each other like the big stones stacked on each other in Jerusalem.

Following this service I invite you to stand before that wall and share your honest feelings with God about whatever is going on in your life. Or you might just think of all your blessings and how grateful you are to God. Or you might imagine someone you wish would be healed or reconciled or blessed in some way.

Write your prayers on a slip of paper and put that paper between the cracks in the wall as a way of giving it to God.

We hope to keep this wall up for the rest of Lent so that you might come anytime during Lent and share your honest concerns about yourself or someone else with God.

Like a child being totally honest with his or her parents, God wants us, as his children to be totally open and honest with him. And like a child who cares for a brother or sister, God wants to use our hands and thoughts as channels for God's healing light and love.

Our Closing hymn is *TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY*. It has these important lines:

TAKE TIME TO BE HOLY, SPEAK OFT WITH THY LORD;  
ABIDE IN HIM ALWAYS, AND FEED ON HIS WORD.  
MAKE FRIENDS OF GOD'S CHILDREN, HELP THOSE WHO ARE WEAK,  
FORGETTING IN NOTHING, HIS BLESSING TO SEEK.

Let us pray.